

Women in Toronto Creating Housing

Participation and Process

BY PAMELA SAYNE

Women's participation in the housing industry is necessary to create housing and communities that serve women's interests. These interests have included but are not limited to child care, secure tenure, economic self-sufficiency, accessible community support services, sustainable ecological environments and freedom from violence. It is out of a desire to promote these interests and to empower women that Women in Toronto Creating Housing (WITCH) was formed. This article explores WITCH's development as a response to women's alienation in the housing industry. It outlines the social context of WITCH's development and documents its endeavours by presenting the results of an evaluation research project conducted in the hope that other housing groups would be encouraged to explore a feminist framework.

Social Conditions Leading to WITCH'S Development

Everyone must live somewhere. Yet the conditions of one's habitat are often determined without recognition of social, economic, physical or cultural needs. This is especially the case for women. Women are predominantly responsible for child care yet generally have lower incomes than men. In addition, our safety and security is threatened by inadequate physical planning and design. These factors work against women, who must compete for housing in the market-driven economy.

Resource management decisions within the housing industry are made primarily by men who form the vast majority of landowners, architects, planners, policymakers and other housing professionals. They determine how housing and land are to be used by people with social, economic and cultural experiences very different from their own. Thus housing design, programs and policies are directed outside the community they serve, producing a form of social control. It is men who make the decisions around issues like the accessibility of community resources, street lighting, housing design and quality of construction, and whose management policies dictate the social composition of households — all of which can gravely affect women's lives. As women are peripheral to the malestream housing industry, so too are their requirements for safe, secure, functional and affordable housing.

Historically, women concerned with housing conditions have responded by forming organizations and communities. For example, the European Beguinages of the Middle Ages were set up to provide women with housing, education, skills and community. More recently, Dolores Hayden in her 1981 book *The Grand Domestic Revolution* has documented western, women-centred approaches to housing design that have given roots to current feminist theory and activism.

Today, feminists involved in the housing industry continue to form their own organizations and networks to address their concerns. The movement includes groups such as the U.S.-based Sheltering Ourselves, A Women's Learning Exchange (SOWLE), designed to empower minorities and lower-income women through housing and economic initiatives; Women's Building Forum of Sweden, putting forward women's needs in designing homes and communities; Women Plan Toronto, which advocates women's concerns in municipal government and agencies; and Femmes et logement in Quebec, which does housing research and lobbies against discrimination and harassment in housing.

The few women who work in the housing professions still remain outside the male professional culture where women's needs, goals and pursuit of community are constrained by male-centred values and perceptions. Women have responded to the contradiction between their experiences in housing and the dominant beliefs about their experiences by learning from each other. They have developed feminist networks as alternatives to male-identified organizations and decision-making in the housing industry and have begun to think about how to reshape housing programs and design.

Background

WITCH participants work in many different capacities in the housing industry, including municipal, provincial and federal governments, local community groups, grassroots self-help housing projects, research, construction management, trades, architecture, planning, design, co-operative housing management and education, tenant advocacy, law and social work. Members are homemakers and homeworkers. WITCH began when a net-

participants were united in stating, "We've got consensus. No one wants more work!" Developing a housing project would mean a voluntary commitment of three years or more with several meetings a week, making it unfeasible for group members at this time. However, the work of WITCH participants on other housing projects continues. WITCH acts as a support group and source of information for women pursuing the development of housing using a feminist approach.

Empowerment: The Network Process

WITCH is seen as empowering women by providing an opportunity to discuss our experiences, work and perceptions of housing and the industry on a regular basis. "WITCH meetings confirm the notion that women do have things to say about housing and have particular interests and concerns!" Participants stated that WITCH is a "place to talk and share women's everyday experiences and ideas about housing," and that "contact with supportive women is important to me as an antidote to my daily grind." WITCH provides a safe place for feminists to explore ideas and create an analysis that goes beyond the mandate of other housing groups. One WITCH member affirmed, as if with new insight, "Housing is a feminist issue!"

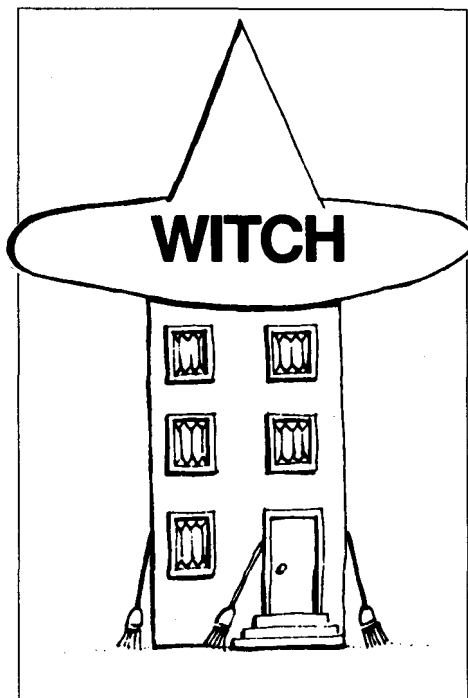
While recognizing the value of supporting each other, participants questioned the elements that so easily allowed the group to reach consensus. One participant suggested that conflict had been avoided because participants were still "dancing around each other." Another noted that "WITCH has really been exploratory." There was a clear understanding that members do not necessarily see issues in the same way. WITCH participants' differing experiences, socialization and organizational training explain the varying perceptions of housing needs. Yet because the group primarily shares information for external projects, its activities and discussions have not engendered competing goals.

Despite the possibility of conflict, the strength of a common concern about how housing development excludes women and undermines their values (as defined by the unifying principle) continues to unite WITCH. The strongest link among members has been the opportunity to

explore issues in a safe, supportive, non-competitive environment.

Empowerment: WITCH Achievements

WITCH has been defined as a brainstorming group, a salon, a think tank, a study circle, a support group, a resource group and an incubator group. Participants describe WITCH meetings as energizing, educational and nurturing, serving both personal and professional needs. It accomplishes this first by informal sharing of information and knowledge of



resources, and second by planned presentations by group members.

Presentations have provided an opportunity for in-depth discussions facilitated by the expertise and experience of group members. They have included a slide review of modular home construction, a review of the process of co-operative and non-profit housing development, a presentation of a neighbourhood planning and design proposal, and a guest presentation by a member of SOWLE. Topics have included development models for obtaining land and construction resources; how housing consultants and resource groups work in the marketplace; recyclable construction wastes; global women and housing links and initiatives; housing management systems; identifying organizations that support similar objectives; physical structures and neighbourhood planning

that support women; gender issues in housing employment; security, safety and accessibility concerns; and the effects of housing programs and policies, all from an evolving feminist perspective. The presentations have enabled group members to become better able to articulate and analyze housing issues within a feminist framework, thus strengthening their feminist initiatives in the housing industry.

The network of WITCH participants extends well beyond monthly meetings and special events. Participants in several grassroots women's housing initiatives have consulted with WITCH in developing housing in Toronto. In one case, WITCH members assisted women in reclaiming their roles as initiators and directors of their housing project. The original grassroots board had been replaced by well-meaning people from outside the project who ignored the development process itself as an important means of empowering women. Reclaiming the board positions gave the future residents input into decision making throughout the development phase. This ensured that the original goals of the housing project, which were to construct secure housing for battered and homeless women, would be met.

This type of dialogue — between women motivated to develop housing based in community needs and those trained and working in housing professions — has been an important part of WITCH's work. This simple process flattens the hierarchical communication structure, de-specializes information and breaks down gatekeeping systems for housing access.

Feminist Models

The objective of developing feminist housing models was affirmed in the evaluation. Members understood the process to involve a non-directive, non-hierarchical organization, information which is shared, and ongoing practical demonstrations and education for alternative development approaches in the field. Specific planning guidelines, building codes and zoning bylaws were seen as impeding women's housing. For example, required building materials are often chosen without consideration for long-term economic maintenance needs, and zoning by-laws frequently inhibit household sharing among

adults unrelated by blood or marriage, or prohibit working out of one's home.

WITCH has no prescribed formulas for feminist housing models. In encouraging feminist approaches to housing in all aspects of the industry, WITCH members have relied on dialogue, that is, discussing each other's ideas and continually applying them to changing housing requirements and resource management to ensure that women's needs are met. For example, a woman planner was having difficulty defining a feminist kitchen to her skeptical colleagues. She discussed

her ideas with supportive WITCH members, who assisted her in clarifying the concept. In this way, feminist ideas about housing are integrated into a political process involving and encouraging diversity.

Summary

Housing options have often played a role in the social control of women constructing women's social and economic dependencies. WITCH, as a very young organization, has responded to the historical

problem of the socio-economic exclusion and segregation of women in the development of housing and communities. Through WITCH's organizational process women have managed to contextualize and support the values developed at its October 1988 workshop. In this way, the process, content and opportunities for housing initiatives have been shaped and re-shaped to empower women through housing.

¹ Summary minutes of the October 26, 1988 WITCH workshop.

Global Women and Shelter Network

A plan of action on women and shelter was launched by NGOs at the New Delhi meeting of Habitat International Coalition (HIC) in April 1988. The women's plan of action calls for the setting up of a global Women and Shelter Network to build up regional and sub-regional focal points that can represent the shelter interests of women in community-based organizations worldwide.

Activities to implement the plan include:

1. Producing a newsletter to disseminate information from and to grass-roots groups in the network.
2. Promoting local, national, regional and inter-regional meetings and exchanges.
3. Helping to collect and disseminate information about:
 - women's access to land,
 - the effects on national development of women's lack of access to adequate shelter and services,
 - methods of organizing women around shelter issues, such as the study circle method.
4. Campaigning for better data on women, and promoting knowledge on women and shelter through public information, and materials for donors and governments.

The Group met again in Stockholm in December 1988, to begin to work out the process by which the Group will eventually transform itself into a truly representative body — representing regions and sub-regions adequately, and representing community-based organizations' interests. This will take place through expansion of the network, building up focal points and generating a participatory dialogue on the important women and shelter issues for each region and sub-region, through whatever forms of exchange suit the local situation.

If you would like to participate in the process, write to Women and Shelter Network, c/o NAC Housing Committee, 344 Bloor Street West, Suite 505, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1W9 or to Women and Shelter Network, P.O. Box 14564, Nairobi, Kenya.

Réseau du Groupe "La femme et l'Habitat" de la CIH / HIC Women and Shelter Network Newsletter, No. 1, Nov., 1989.

Le Réseau du groupe "La Femme et l'habitat"

Un plan d'action sur la femme et l'habitat a été lancé à la réunion de la Coalition Internationale pour l'Habitat tenue à New Delhi en avril 1988. Le plan d'action des femmes demande qu'un Réseau mondial, "La Femme et l'habitat", soit créé afin de mettre en place des points focaux régionaux et sous-régionaux pour représenter les intérêts de la femme dans les organisations à base communautaire à travers le monde.

Les activités concernant la mise en application du plan comprennent:

1. La production d'un bulletin pour disséminer l'information provenant de la base et à l'intention de celle-ci dans le réseau.
2. La promotion des réunions et des échanges aux niveaux local, national, régional et inter-régional.
3. La production et la distribution de l'information concernant:
 - le droit de la femme d'acquiescer une terre,
 - les effets de l'inexistence du droit de la femme à un logement et aux services de base adéquats sur le développement national,
 - méthodes pour organiser les femmes de façon à les sensibiliser aux problèmes de l'habitat, telles que la méthode de groupes d'étude.
4. L'établissement d'une campagne pour obtenir des données correctes sur les femmes, et promouvoir la connaissance des problèmes concernant la femme et l'habitat par le canal de l'information du public, et des matériaux provenant des donateurs et des gouvernements.

Le groupe s'est de nouveau réuni à Stockholm en décembre 1988, pour commencer à mettre au point le processus par lequel le groupe pourra éventuellement se transformer en un organisme réellement représentatif — représentant les régions et les sous-régions de façon adéquate, et représentant les intérêts des organisations à base communautaire. Cela est possible à travers l'expansion du réseau, la création de points focaux et d'un dialogue sur les problèmes importants concernant la femme et l'habitat dans chaque région et sous-région en tenant compte de formes d'échange appropriées à la situation locale.

Voulez-vous participer dans le processus? Ecrivez à: La Femme et l'habitat, aux bons soins de NAC Housing Committee, 344 rue Bloor ouest, bureau 505, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1W9 ou à La Femme et l'habitat, B.P. Box 14564, Nairobi, Kenya.